



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
INFORMATION SERVICE

office Her
10/28/54

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release Tuesday, OCTOBER 26, 1954

FWS BIOLOGISTS TO STUDY ALBATROSS PROBLEM ON MIDWAY

Two wildlife biologists of the Fish and Wildlife Service have been assigned to help alleviate the hazards to aircraft now being caused by albatrosses on Midway Island in the central Pacific, Secretary of the Interior Douglas McKay announced today. The Departments of the Navy and Air Force requested assistance of the Department of the Interior in solving the problem.

So far this year, the Division of Flying Safety, Military Air Transport Service, has recorded 10 accidents caused by the collision of aircraft with these large sea birds which have a wingspread of seven feet. None of the accidents were fatal to airmen.

With the increased use of jet planes, the Defense Department fears that some of these "gooney-birds" may be sucked down the forward induction vents, thus causing the planes to explode.

Philip A. DuMont, of the Service's central office, and Johnson A. Neff, of the Denver research laboratory will arrive on Midway early in November, the beginning of the albatross nesting season. They will study the situation and recommend control measures for those birds which are now nesting too close to the runways.

A similar problem arose in the south Atlantic during World War II. Dr. James P. Chapin, of the American Museum of Natural History, found on investigation at Ascension Island that the sooty terns would move elsewhere on the island, well away from the airstrip, if all of their first laying of eggs in areas close to the airstrip were destroyed.

This procedure will be tried on Midway. The use of ultra-high frequency equipment has also been suggested as a means of discouraging the birds from nesting in the vicinity of the runway.

The two islands within the Midway Atoll--Sand and Eastern--are under Navy jurisdiction. Since 1946 the area has been a Federal wildlife refuge. All of the other islands in the far-flung Leeward group were established as the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge in 1909.

Bird populations on Midway have varied considerably since this atoll was discovered in 1859 by Captain N. C. Brooks who took possession of it for the United States. In the 1880's, shipwrecked sailors who existed on these islands for many months before being rescued, lived entirely on the albatrosses, petrels, bobbies,

and terns which used the islands for nesting. In 1922, when Dr. Alexander Wetmore, former Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, was on Midway he found about 9,000 albatrosses occupying the area. By 1946, the population of these birds had increased to approximately 214,000. No recent estimates have been made. Extensive military operations have not discouraged the birds from using these islands for nesting.

The albatross, or "gooney-bird" as it is known to military personnel who have seen service in the Pacific theater, is noted for its untiring flight. This bird of the open ocean seldom comes to land except to nest. The wandering albatross, another member of this family group, was the subject of Coleridge's poem, "The Ancient Mariner."

Of the 13 kinds of albatrosses in the world, only three belong to the north Pacific--the Laysan, the black-footed, and the short-tailed. Nearly three-fourths of all Laysan and black-footed albatrosses nest on Midway and Laysan Islands. The remainder nest on other islands of the Hawaiian refuge. Huge numbers of petrels and terns also nest on Midway in summer.

Every effort will be made to guard against the extermination of any species of birds on Midway, such as occurred on Laysan Island. Laysan formerly had three birds found nowhere else. Two of these--a millerbird and a honeyeater--disappeared when rabbits were introduced by guano workers about 1903. The Laysan rail--a flightless marsh bird which was exterminated on Laysan because rabbits ate up the vegetation--was introduced on Midway in 1887 where it flourished until rats were brought in during World War II. A fourth distinct species--the Laysan teal--was last reported to be increasing slightly in numbers although they have never exceeded 100 birds.

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